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Monday 7 July 1986

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

*Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe, QC, MP,
Sir Patrick Wright, KCMG, and Mr D M D Thomas, CMG*

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MONDAY 7 JULY 1986

Members present:

Sir Anthony Kershaw, in the Chair
Mr Dennis Canavan
Mr Robert Harvey
Mr Ivan Lawrence
Mr Jim Lester

Mr Ian Mikardo
Mr Nigel Spearing
Mr Peter Thomas
Mr Bowen Wells

Examination of witness

SIR GEOFFREY HOWE, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, examined. SIR PATRICK WRIGHT, KCMG, Permanent Under Secretary of State, and MR D M D THOMAS, CMG, Deputy Under Secretary of State and Political Director, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, called in and examined.

Chairman

196. As you probably know, Foreign Secretary, we are going to have the pleasure, after seeing you, of seeing the Russian Ambassador and Colonel-General Chervov, who is the principal negotiator at Geneva on behalf of the USSR. I should like to start by asking the following question about Salt II: to what extent was Her Majesty's Government consulted about the United States' decision to renounce the provisions of the Salt II Treaty?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) It had been the subject of consultation between us over a period of some time, because it was discussed at the North Atlantic Council meeting in Lisbon in June of last year before the President made certain announcements then. Then this year, Mr Paul Nitze visited London on 23 April and saw the Prime Minister and myself. That was part of his consultations in other European capitals—Paris, Bonn, Rome, The Hague and now in Brussels, I think. So we were very fully consulted and were able to convey our views to the American administration about the importance which we attach to both sides continuing to observe the SALT II agreement.

197. It is maintained by the United States Government that SALT II was not only not particularly useful for the purposes for which it was designed, but at any rate had been disregarded and, therefore, could not be thought to be a very useful instrument towards disarmament. Is that a view which Her Majesty's Government would share?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I think the view expressed by the American administration

about it in the immediate aftermath of the decision which was announced just before the Halifax meeting of the North Atlantic Council, was rather more in the direction you have just indicated than it had been in previous months. Since that time it has also been modified a little, so that the position is less critical in the sense of the Treaty concept itself. Our own view is that, although there may be shortcomings about the Treaty, it is far better to build on the arms control instruments which exist; to take care not to allow the best to be the enemy of the good. And that I think is the view we have tried to convey all the way through, which I think has received a very sympathetic response in the last couple of weeks, not least in the President's Glassboro speech, for example.

198. Do you think the American view for denouncing SALT II, that it would concentrate the Soviet mind and make them more likely to negotiate, has been confirmed? Has that happened? Do you think the Soviets now are prepared to concentrate more seriously on the need for a new strategic arms agreement?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I would hesitate to pronounce on that particular linkage, Mr. Chairman, because if I remember correctly the most recent indications of a change in position on the part of the Soviet Union were at Geneva, either just preceding or only just succeeding by a few days the formal statement made by the President about SALT II, so I do not think one could argue cause and effect. One could perhaps argue that the change in the Soviet position was indicated notwithstanding the just-preceding statement about SALT II, but I do not think one could argue the other way around.

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[Continued]

Mr. Spearing

199. Can I turn now, Foreign Secretary, to the nuclear test ban treaty, and you will know there has been some scepticism about the British Government's policy here, particularly from the scientific world where it is claimed that new methods of verification are now possible. Despite this, there have been American underground tests recently and we understand they have tested a United Kingdom device. In view of this scepticism, and in view of the action taken by the United Kingdom, what hope do you think there is of a nuclear test ban treaty and what is the Government's reply to the critics?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) We would like to see progress towards the nuclear test ban treaty. We do, nevertheless, regard the outstanding verification difficulties as being significant. I know there are differing views in the scientific community about this, but the best advice we have received is that they are of continuing importance. I do not think we should conclude that the continuation of nuclear tests while negotiations are still in progress, or suspended, will have a decisive effect on the future.

200. Large numbers of people would call into faith the British Government's policy if, indeed (as indeed they have), they authorised an explosion of a nuclear device while these talks are going on. Does it not call Britain's good faith into question?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) I think not. During part of the negotiations—from 1977 to 1980—when the negotiations were in progress, all three countries were in fact conducting tests and nobody then raised the point you are just making.

Mr. Mikardo

201. Sir Geoffrey, is it not a hard fact, whether we like it or not, to be realistic, that the United States has no intention whatever of making any progress towards a comprehensive test ban treaty until it has itself (and perhaps not even then) carried out a series of tests which are already programmed and which are going to last some time? May I add that this question is inspired by what I heard when some of us went to Geneva during the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference and had the opportunity of talking to a number of Americans.

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) I am not going to question the source of inspiration of someone of your wisdom and experience,

Mr Mikardo. What I can say is this: the Soviet Union, if one begins to make points of this kind, although they have committed themselves to political gestures of moratoria in this field, have proved reluctant to take the practical steps important to make real headway; reluctant to agree on the mandate to discuss verification problems. I do not think you should rest upon the conclusion about the United States' policy you have just put forward. Could I add one other thought: I believe one is more likely to generate the confidence which is a key component on both sides, even in the test ban treaty area, if one is able to make progress in some of the other arms control negotiations. In other words, if one was able to find a way forward on the strategic weapons topic in Geneva, that might itself help both sides to generate additional confidence which might itself make the atmosphere for CTBT negotiations more fruitful.

202. Could that apply the other way around? If *A* is going to lead to *B*, could *B* help us lead to *A*?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) The CTBT negotiations took place for three years and, since 1980, have been in suspension for six years. The verification issue has been one matter which cannot at present be surmounted. There is auspicious prospect, I would guess, for movement towards the resumption of strategic talks in Geneva, which is why I put it the way round I did.

203. On verification, the Americans claim that their satellites can read the number plate of a motor car. How much closer do you need to get to be able to verify it?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) It depends what you are wanting to verify. It is no doubt very effective if you are wanting to verify the number of a motor car! It is not necessarily the right technique—and I speak now as a total non-expert—in verifying the existence or non-existence of an underground nuclear test.

204. It makes a bigger noise and takes up more space than a motor car number plate, does it not?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) Again, you would have to ask experts about that. I am not really going to swap that kind of experience.

Mr Lawrence

205. There have been signs, Sir Geoffrey, that the Soviets are making a greater effort to bring about disarmament and

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[Continued]

[Mr Lawrence *Contd.*]

détente over recent months, and perhaps over the recent year or two, than in the period up until then. Do you believe that the reason for that has anything to do with the development of the Strategic Defence Initiative?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) It is hard to be sure, but I should have thought that one of the features that has been influencing the Soviet thinking about this—and I have no doubt on the Western side as well—has been the prospect of the mounting cost of maintaining strategic parity, and one component of that must be the difficulty in doing that in the face of mounting technological sophistication. So I think that to that extent strategic defence must be a component that has been part of the argument. I suspect also that there has been a significant success for Western policy in persuading the Soviet Union that the West is in earnest in seeking a way forward on arms control. If I have to put it in personal terms, when I was in Moscow talking to Mr Chernenko, in the summer of 1984, I then detected a profound scepticism about the good faith of the West. I think that what happened during that year, as a result of a whole range of representations, was a commencement of change in that perception, a beginning on the part of the Soviet Union to see that the West was sincere, a realisation that the Soviet Union had made a mistake in walking away from the bargaining table as it had, and perhaps a recognition that mounting activity on the SDI side was an added reason for coming to the bargaining table.

206. I think—if it is not presumptuous of me—that I can interpret your answer as being partly yes.

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I should not be as decisive as that! If you want to be accurate in this very, very difficult field, I should say “partly maybe”!

207. However your listeners may interpret that answer, may I suggest that if the development of the Strategic Defence Initiative, for cost reasons or any other reasons, has brought the Soviets closer to disarmament and détente, it is partly because they themselves have been developing along the lines of the Strategic Defence Initiative and realise that they are not going to win that particular battle without massive outlay of resources, which they are not necessarily prepared to contemplate. Can you tell us what information we have about whether and to what extent the Soviets have been

developing a Strategic Defence Initiative? Presumably the other reason for thinking that they may be is the slight change of tack whereby they are prepared to countenance research but not development. The difference between the two we shall ask Mr Zamyatin about when he comes to speak to us a little later this afternoon, 'but presumably there is some development that we know about, and perhaps it would be helpful for all of us to know what it is on the Russian side. Perhaps it would not be helpful!

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I must try and take that briefly. The point is that the Soviet Union has been engaged in research in this area of defensive techniques for a number of years. I cannot now give you the whole range of detail, but that can be made available to you if you want. That is one of the reasons why the United States regards the pursuit of matching research as important, and why we take the same view as well. It is an old topic, in the sense that it was part of the background to the preparation of the ABM Treaty in 1972, and I think that it is the framework against which, or within which, the United States agreed with our Prime Minister at Camp David on the need for developments in this field to take place within the framework of existing treaty obligations. So I think that what one has seen is perhaps a re-realisation of the potential in terms of cost and sophistication of going further down this road, and a recognition on both sides of the importance of a treaty framework to regulate it. I think one can spend a much longer time speculating than perhaps we have got time for.

Mr Spearing

208. Sir Geoffrey, a lot of people may not have the confidence you have in HM Government's policy on nuclear testing which we were talking about a few minutes ago, but I am glad we agree on the need for confidence, good faith and some degree of visibility. Can I now turn, in that regard, to chemical weapons, because up until recently Britain has had a “clean sheet” on that particular topic but, since the Americans suddenly changed their policy a few weeks ago, it appears that the United Kingdom Government, rather than maintaining its view, has become sympathetic to them. Would not this have been an ideal opportunity for the British Government to make some unilateral declaration

¹Minutes of Evidence 7 July 1986, HC (1985–86) 69–vi

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[Continued]

[Mr Spearing *Contd.*]

concerning chemical weapons? Would not that have added to the very need for confidence that you were talking about a few moments ago?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) I think it is a very striking example of a field in which one should draw exactly the opposite conclusion, as a matter of fact. We naturally believe in the importance of getting a worldwide ban on chemical weapons. Like every other agreement, it has to be governed by an agreement on verification. As far as unilateral gestures are concerned, the United Kingdom has not been in the business of chemical warfare capability since the late 1950s. The United States has observed a unilateral moratorium on chemical weapon manufacture for 17 years. I think the sadness, if you like, is that we have not made more of the fact that for that length of time we have been doing exactly what you are now saying we ought to do, because during that time, while we have had no capability in the UK, while we have had a 17-year moratorium in the United States, the Soviet Union has continued to build up a very substantial chemical weapons threat. They have now got a stockpile of nerve-agent weapons alone estimated at 300,000 tons. It is in face of the failure to achieve agreement, notwithstanding the immense restraint on the Western side, that we have thought it justifiable to support the conclusions which are themselves tentative, like the United States. Their CW capability will not be assembled until December next year, so there is still an 18-month window in which the benefits of the West's long-running unilateral moratorium can be put to advantage. The ball is in the Soviet court. If they negotiate seriously, then nothing would give me greater pleasure; and the 18-month notice of the American intention to change a policy of 18 years' restraint is the best possible way of underlining that this is now the right time to move to a negotiated ban on chemical weapons.

209. You mention the 18 months window. Am I not right in thinking that in fact the Soviet Union has returned the ball over the net on that one, and there are some quite promising proposals which have been considered, and that they are only hung up on one particular issue? Is not that the case?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) I think that this is a topic where, on the face of it, we should be closer to progress than on many others,

because although the Soviet Union has sought in other fora to try to reach out for a narrower ban on chemical weapons, in the worldwide ban search that is going on in Geneva there is, I think, a more businesslike atmosphere, and I think it is seen that verification is the key issue there. The United Kingdom, of course, is in the chair of those negotiations on that topic at the present time, and we shall obviously be wanting to see if we can promote further progress along the lines you have in mind.

210. Is it not a fact that the Soviet Union has offered considerable verification facilities on the whole question of chemical warfare?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) Yes, but both sides have got verification proposals on the table. They have not yet come close enough together. I am not going to begin choosing between one and the other, save to say this is not the key, that is a key on the table.

211. Would it not have been better for the United Kingdom to have remained neutral on this issue during this 18-month window rather than supporting one side and not the other, which you appear to have done?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) It is not a question of supporting one side or the other, though it is worth remembering we are allies of the United States, not the Soviet Union. In fact, having said that, we take the view that this decision by the United States—18 months of staggered consultation—may be one of the components that at least induces greater willingness to look for greater proposals than anything else.

Mr Mikardo

212. Sir Geoffrey, Mr Gorbachev, has made a number of direct overtures to the Prime Minister about the possibilities of direct bilateral talks on nuclear and conventional weapons, could you outline for us HMG's position at this time on this issue?

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) The topics we shall want to discuss with Mr Gorbachev are those we have discussed in the past with him and his predecessors, namely the need to secure significant reductions in the strategic arsenals of the Soviet Union and the United States. That is the key topic.

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[Continued]

[Mr Mikardo *Contd.*]

213. Is there not an element in the bilateral negotiations, or attempted bilateral negotiations, of matters which fall within the purview and decision-making capacity of HM Government as distinct from the Government of the United States?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) The question might arise there, as I said in the *locus classicus* of our position to the General Assembly in September 1983: if there were to be very substantial reductions in American and Soviet strategic arsenals and if no significant change had taken place in the issue of the Soviet Union then we would want to review how best we could contribute to that position. That has not arisen and we have not been pressed to take any movement in that direction.

214. You have not been pressed. Do you envisage any possibility whatever that in any such talks Her Majesty's Government might have something to say which is not merely an echo of what has been said by Washington?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) With respect, so far as the United States and the Soviet Union strategic stockpiles are concerned, whether or not it is an echo of Washington, to be pressing for a 50 per cent reduction in strategic weapon stocks is a formidable proposal and it is one of the important Western proposals we want to see progress on. It is not a matter of Washington, it is a united chorus of Western allies. One has to remember the whole time that our nuclear armoury is about a third of that of the Soviet Union.

Chairman: Could we turn to the problem of the UK/US relations and NATO?

Mr Thomas

215. This really follows on from some of the questions that have been asked by Mr Mikardo and Mr Spearing. It appears quite clear that a number of actual problems, including South Africa of course, have highlighted, in recent months, both the importance of the relationship between the UK and the USA and also the problems resulting from that relationship. I think it is probably right I should remind you of allegations which are made which were referred to in some ways by questions that were asked by my two colleagues; allegations, for instance, implicit in Mr Mikardo's question to you that, in recent years, the UK have probably been echoing too much the policies of the Reagan administration,

sometimes to the detriment of its relations with the EEC and the Commonwealth; also, the allegations that President Reagan is all too often ignoring HMG's advice. Could you, in general terms, describe the current state of relations between the two Governments?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I think the relations between the two governments are in good order in the crucially important sense that consultation between the two governments is continuous and candid and fruitful. We do not always come to the same conclusions. We have had some examples already discussed this afternoon. We had consultations between ourselves and other European partners in the United States about Salt II and Treaty compliance last summer, we came to the same view then. We had the same run of consultations this spring, we did not come to the same view. I think the general framework is in good order. You may judge for yourselves whether there is a greater or lesser pattern of disagreement now than at other times. But, the relationship which is one part of those which the United Kingdom has to maintain is in good order. I was struck by the comment made by President Weizsaecker in his superb speech when he said: "... We are grateful to the United Kingdom for the particular contribution it is rendering to this process..." that is the process of transatlantic dialogue "... by nurturing its long-standing relationship of mutual trust with the United States. Trust is not dependence. On the contrary, tangible accomplishments of the Europeans, and their common will, are essential for keeping that mutual trust alive." I think Britain's role is an important part in the European Community seeking to achieve understanding and unity there. It is entirely consistent with our role and the Europeans' role as part of the alliance and Britain's special role which President Weizsaecker identified there. It is in working order from day to day, week to week, month to month. Disagreement may fluctuate. We have been through years of long disagreement about Vietnam. There has been disagreement about Suez. There has not been a pattern of continuous harmonisation but the relationship has survived that.

216. I am grateful that the good relations between the countries are of enormous importance and agreed by most of us, I think. What I was interested in was what you said about consultation because,

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as you were aware, in previous reports we noted the lack of consultation between the UK and the US Governments on matters of common interest. One was on the invasion of Grenada. In our recent report on UK/Soviet relations we re-produced the opinion of the Aspen Institute International Group that, within the Alliance, "the entire consultative process must be infused with a new spirit." The question I would like to ask is are you happy there is adequate consultation between the US Administration and European Allies and particularly the British Government?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe) I think it is a topic that is taken very seriously; I certainly take it very seriously. I think that within the limits of time and space, so to speak, and the human arrangements that can be made, it is pretty good institutionally. I was struck when I became Foreign Secretary by the absence of anything comparable to the G5 group in the finance ministers and, partly as a result of my analysis since then, we do now have a pattern of G7 meetings of foreign ministers, the seven economic summit countries, who meet at times other than those when the summit meets. We meet at the UN General Assembly and maintain that broader contact. I think we are all conscious of the need to be sure that the increasing habit of increasing European consultation does not in any sense diminish transatlantic contact. It is something we talk about quite a lot in the Community, we talk a lot in the Halifax meeting. One takes a different approach on terrorism as indicative of the need to try harder. I think the important thing is that the trust, the confidence and contact are there and we do all go on trying to try harder. Whether one can suggest any different institutional superstructure I do not know, but I rather doubt it. I have become slightly sceptical of the multiplication of fora. There are too many fora on the way to which I meet people!

Chairman: Could we turn to the UK-US consultation before the Libyan episode and I would ask Mr Canavan to come in.

Mr Canavan

217. Sir Geoffrey, in the House on the 16 April concern was expressed that the line you were pursuing in the European Foreign Ministers Meeting on Monday 14 April in favour of peaceful measures and non-escalation was inconsistent with the

knowledge you must have had at that time of the USA's plans to attack. In the House you said at the time of the meeting you had no confirmation of any decision by the President to attack, still less of any decision to authorise raids that night. Can you clarify exactly how much you knew of the United States' plans at that time?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I think that that was clarified, so far as it needed clarification, by the written answer I gave on 28 April, when I made clear—and I will not read the whole answer—that I was present at No. 10 on the evening when the first message came through from President Reagan about possible developments, that I played a full part in the consultations which followed that. That those consultations, of course—and I quote—"included a visit to London and other European capitals by General Walters", the series of visits was undertaken on 12 April in Britain, and I think the 13 and 14 in France and Germany. I go on to say that in consequence of the meeting of European Community Foreign Ministers on Monday, 14 April, I was aware, as indeed were others with whom the United States had been in touch, that US military action against Libya was an early possibility. That was the message that had come through to all of us in General Walters' perambulations. I was also aware both of President Reagan's request for agreement on the use of US aircraft from bases in the United Kingdom and the response which had been given to that request. Like others, however, I had no confirmation that the President had taken the final decision to go ahead specifically on the night of 14-15 April until I returned to London after the meeting. So the position in a nutshell is that a number of those around the table in The Hague on the 14th had more than a general knowledge of the possible next moves by the United States, but nobody had any confirmation that the final decision had been taken.

218. Presumably you had more knowledge than anybody else round that table because it was only Britain that had been asked, and given permission, for the use of bases, was it not?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) Well, I do not know who had been asked what. We do know, do we not, that we found out subsequently that overflying rights over France were sought and were not granted in the event. We also know General

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[Continued]

[Mr Canavan *Contd.*]

Walters was going round Europe presenting the case in that way. I should not want to have any sense of mystery about this, quite frankly. There is no question of any lack of disclosure or lack of good faith about this at all. Everyone round the table at The Hague on the Monday knew that American action might well be imminent and we came to conclusions in light of that.

219. The Government had made clear that, in negotiations between the United States and the United Kingdom on permission to use the Americans' UK bases, it was agreed the operation would be limited to clearly defined targets related to terrorism. Was the British Government given a precise list of targets or was there just a general undertaking on the part of the United States that the targets would be within the terms of the conditions?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) There was no specific list of targets disclosed to us at that stage. We had an exchange of views in which we gave indications about what, if anything, should be done but there was no list of targets vouchsafed to us at all.

220. Did you have any idea how many targets or potential targets there were?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I do not think so, no. No, I do not think in advance we did. We had laid down very clear criteria as to what they should be and again that has been summarised more than once in the House. We had made plain that any move should be directed against clearly defined targets demonstrably involved in the conduct and support of terrorist activity, and in a fashion designed to pay the highest possible regard to the avoidance of casualties, civilian or otherwise, and of collateral damage—I am quoting from the debate on the 23 April, column 304.

221. Was it known in the case of at least one of these targets in Tripoli there was a very serious probability, as distinct from a mere possibility, of civilian casualties?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I am not in a position to comment on that. Of course, we did not know the targets in advance. What I make plain is the nature of the points that we had made about the nature of the targets that could be involved.

222. In choosing the conditions and the type of targets which would be under attack, was there any consultation with the United States about the possibility, or

indeed the probability, of civilian casualties?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I have made plain we were not consulted or informed about the precise targets, but we did give the clearest possible response about the nature of the targets, that they should be demonstrably connected with the promotion or control of terrorism, and the attack should be undertaken with the highest possible regard to the avoidance of casualties or otherwise—

Mr Mikardo

223. Do you believe, Sir Geoffrey, in the light of what you know that the abjuration which you gave to the United States was carried out?

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) I am not in a position to comment on each and every one of the particular points, but it is clear, of course, that there were some civilian casualties. I think that in the nature of such things it is extremely difficult to avoid them altogether, and we regret that.

Chairman: We have time for one more question about the Presidency.

Mr Lester

224. Sir Geoffrey, you thought it important that you should attend and speak at the United Nations Special Assembly on Africa, which produced a satisfactory communiqué. What priority do you give in the period of the United Kingdom's Presidency in the Community to measuring up to the obligations that were then accepted in terms of the increased resources that would be needed to stop the outward flow of capital and interest from the developing countries into the developed world, the work on the replenishment of the IDA, and the use of European Development Fund and their own bilateral aid? I know it was with that responsibility that you spoke at the Assembly and I know you take an interest in these matters.

(Sir Geoffrey Howe.) It is a very wide question which goes beyond our Presidency. On responsibility in the European Community, I made plain, for example—and I cannot pick up all the points you mentioned—the importance that we attach to the next IDA replenishment being substantial, to use the jargon of the trade, and we attach importance to the next round of GATT negotiations which we want to get under way as quickly as possible. That is another direct

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Community responsibility. We want to conduct in parallel with that the completion of the MFA negotiations—the multi-fibre agreement. We are not at this stage in course of reaching a new Lomé agreement; the last one is still in place. I do not think there is anything else immediately in the Community on that front.

Chairman

225. Secretary of State, I am very

grateful indeed, as are all the Committee, for your having come with the great press of business that you have suddenly had thrust on you today. We are sorry that you could not come for the scheduled amount of time because of your commitment in the House, and we look forward perhaps to the chance of seeing you when you come back later on.

(*Sir Geoffrey Howe.*) Thank you very much, Mr Chairman.